



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

Trump Counter-Terrorism: The Five Foundations for Success

English, R. (2017). Trump Counter-Terrorism: The Five Foundations for Success. *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, (Special Issue:), 77-86. <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/contact/>

Published in:
Georgetown Security Studies Review

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights
Copyright 2012-2017, Georgetown Security Studies Review. This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.



The Georgetown Security Studies Review (GSSR)

ISSN: 2474-8552 (Print) 2474-8560 (Online)

Journal homepage: <http://www.georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/>

Trump Counterterrorism: The Five Foundations for Success

Richard English

To cite this article: Richard English, "Trump Counterterrorism: The Five Foundations for Success," *The Georgetown Security Studies Review*, Special Issue: What the New Administration Needs to Know About Terrorism and Counterterrorism, 77-84.

To link to this article: <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/English-Trump-Counterterrorism-The-Five-Foundations-for-Success.pdf>

Published online: 24 February 2017

View entire issue: <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/GSSR-What-the-New-Administration-Needs-to-Know-About-Terrorism-and-Counterterrorism.pdf>

Contribute to this journal: <http://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/contribute/>

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in *Georgetown Security Studies Review* do not necessarily represent those of the editors or staff of GSSR, the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, or Georgetown University. The editorial board of GSSR and its affiliated peer reviewers strive to verify the accuracy of all factual information contained in GSSR. However, the staffs of GSSR, the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, and Georgetown University make no warranties or representations regarding the completeness or accuracy of information contained in GSSR, and they assume no legal liability or responsibility for the content of any work contained therein.

Trump Counterterrorism: The Five Foundations for Success

Richard English

Introduction

The counterterrorist challenges faced by each new US administration are unique. But reflection on the long history of terrorism and counterterrorism might yield some valuable elements of an effective approach, and this article humbly proposes five such lines of thinking in relation to the Donald Trump Presidency. Central to the argument is the crucial reality that terrorism and counterterrorism exist in a mutually shaping relationship,¹ and that it has been state responses to terrorism that have most shaped historical change, rather than the acts of non-state terrorists themselves. Put another way, much of what develops across world politics and international relations over coming years will be determined by the choices that President Trump and those around him take in response to the challenge of terrorism.

1. What the Administration will have to deal with is terrorisms, rather than terrorism.

This is a vital point, and it must be borne in mind in relation to all counterterrorist decisions and policies during the Trump Administration's time in office. In the wake of the 9/11 atrocity, there was an understandable urge to do something about terrorism as such. But the dynamics of terrorism, and of effective counterterrorism, always rely ultimately on recognizing what is unique about each terrorist organization, cause, or threat that is faced. There are many diverse terrorist groups and actors across the globe, of course. But even if one considers jihadist terrorism (the most high-profile challenge in the terrorist arena as far as President Trump is likely to be concerned), it is very much terrorisms rather than terrorism that he will need to address. Jihadists in ISIS differ in significant ways from those in the enduring world of al-Qa'ida;² ISIS in Syria represents different levels of difficulty from ISIS within Iraq; lone actors in the West who identify with ISIS operate according to frequently different dynamics again (lone-actor violence often involving very different origins and processes from group-based terrorism).³

Much current commentary unhelpfully conflates what are ultimately different terrorisms. To protect Americans against lone-actor threats involves understanding the precise world of

¹ R. English (ed.), *Illusions of Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² F. A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); B. Hoffman and F. Reinares (eds), *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat: From 9/11 to Osama bin Laden's Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

³ P. Gill, *Lone-Actor Terrorists: A Behavioural Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2015).

operation (and effective counter-operation) that the evidence suggests to be necessary in relation to such terrorists; limiting ISIS's effectiveness in Syria is a different matter, requiring different strategies and understanding. This has implications for the use of specialist expertise. Often, what is required is not so much terrorist experts, but rather terrorist expertise combined with deep regional wisdom and knowledge as offered in policy-friendly analysis. I have yet to meet, for example, a first-class historian of Iraq who thought that what had been promised about the likely effects of 2003 regime change in that country was even faintly plausible. Had such voices been seriously heeded at the time, and the post-invasion fiasco been avoided, then we would not now be facing ISIS. In order not to worsen the situation regarding terrorism over coming years, President Trump must listen carefully to those various kinds of expert who know in detail about the different forms of terrorism with which he has to deal, and about the different historical contexts within which they have each emerged.

2. The Administration must be realistic (internally, as well as publicly) about what might reasonably be expected to be achieved in the field of counterterrorism.

I have been influenced recently by the work of UCLA's Steven Spiegel and his colleagues regarding the United States' efforts to bring peace to the Middle East.⁴ This scholarship demonstrates how incredibly difficult it is to make serious progress in reducing terrorist violence even in what has been a high-priority area of counterterrorist regional policy for the United States. Many other cases reinforce the point. The Northern Ireland Peace Process (one of the most successful endeavors to reduce terrorist violence) is a process which has now gone on as long as did the conflict to which it brought something like an end;⁵ and even here, at time of writing, the political process so generated is faltering,⁶ and terrorist violence (albeit at a much reduced level) still persists.

This insight has implications for Syria and Iraq, which will clearly preoccupy the president significantly and which have far larger global implications than Northern Ireland. But it is also important for dealings with Israel/Palestine, with Colombia, and with the various terrorist challenges faced by Russia and China and on which the Trump regime will need to have a stance.

⁴ S. L. Spiegel *et al*, *The Peace Puzzle: America's Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace, 1989-2011* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁵ R. English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2012; 1st edn 2003).

⁶ See, for example, the much-publicized resignation letter from the then Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, Martin McGuinness, of January 9, 2017, which precipitated the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive.

I have argued elsewhere that one of the implications of a close reading of the long history of terrorism is that we must learn to live with it rather than pretend that we can eradicate it entirely.⁷ To exaggerate what can be achieved merely gives gifts to one's terrorist opponents, who can then present their continued existence and operation as, in themselves, a kind of victory. For all of the seeming demands for public rhetoric, I still think that President Trump's Inaugural Speech declaration—'we will eradicate [radical Islamic terrorism] completely from the face of the earth' (January 20th, 2017)—sets the bar of expectation far too high. One of the areas of success open to terrorists is the maintenance of resistance in the face of state hostility.⁸ To state publicly that you are going to achieve things in counterterrorism that are simply not achievable gives another gift to your terrorist adversaries. This should be avoided.

Likewise, there should emerge as far as possible a realistic set of expectations among the US public about what can and cannot be achieved. Not every terrorist attack can be prevented, and people should recognize this, just as they can be reassured that their likelihood of being a victim of such an attack is incredibly small in practice.

In all of this, it is again vital to remember that it is the relationship between terrorism and counterterrorism which most changes history. Every major decision by a state, and every claim about what a state will do in relation to terrorism, will affect the shape of the terrorisms that it faces. In the case of the post-9/11 decision to engage in Iraq, and to justify this partly in relation to the terrorist threat, the outcomes have been far from entirely benign. Strikingly, the then senior CIA man who lastingly interrogated Saddam Hussein after his capture, makes the depressing observation that, "The rise of Islamic extremism in Iraq, chiefly under the rubric of ISIS (or Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham), is a catastrophe that the United States needn't have faced had it been willing to live with an aging and disengaged Saddam Hussein."⁹

Part of the problem here arose from overconfidence in regard to what could be done to reshape the world after the 9/11 attacks, and an exaggerated expectation of what it was feasible to achieve. In regard to what is now faced in relation to ISIS, there must be recognition about how little will be achievable purely through military means, and also about how lengthy a problem ISIS and its Syrian and Iraqi setting are likely to prove.

⁷ R. English, *Terrorism: How to Respond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁸ R. English, *Does Terrorism Work? A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹ J. Nixon, *Debriefing the President: The Interrogation of Saddam Hussein* (London: Bantam Press, 2016), p. 1.

3. The Administration must be coordinated and unified in its counterterrorism, both within the US state, and in terms of its external alliances.

Effective coordination is a central element in successful counterterrorism. It is also depressingly difficult to achieve. Different wings of the same state find it understandably hard enough to liaise smoothly with one another, while dealings between states are more complex and awkward still. In Europe, efforts to ensure that the European Union works as a unified counterterrorist actor made progress after 9/11 and amid ensuing dangers; but they also came up against the repeated pattern of national attitudes, structures, and approaches getting in the way of effective coordination.¹⁰ The challenges faced here are hardly likely to ease in the wake of the UK's departure from the European Union. For the Trump Administration, the difficulty of ensuring coordination between police forces, agencies, and other US state actors represents an inherited challenge of serious proportions (not least given the tense relationship that initially existed between the incoming president and the US Intelligence Community). But where counterterrorist efforts in the past century have been most successful, one element has been the establishing of unity of action and purpose and cooperation between different wings of the state in question.¹¹ Moreover, positive relationships with key allies internationally should be a priority. This will include consideration of Middle Eastern players (Israel, obviously, but also Jordan in a decisive manner too); it will also include the patient pursuit of strong relations with key European allies, and the avoidance of negative blowback regarding terrorism when the US engages with Russia and China.

4. The Administration must communicate a sustainedly credible series of messages about terrorism.

Credibility derives both from the content of the message, and from the perceptions people have regarding the person delivering the message to them. President Trump enjoys great credibility with sections of the United States population not always sympathetic to Washingtonians. This is a great resource. He has famous difficulties in regard to credibility with many others in the country, and internationally he has yet to establish himself as a figure whose pronouncements on major issues carry enough high seriousness.

The long history of terrorism provides many examples of states damaging and undermining themselves through making incredible claims. States frequently depict terrorist

¹⁰ J. Argomaniz, *The EU and Counterterrorism: Politics, Polity and Policies after 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2011).

¹¹ W. Matchett, *Secret Victory: The Intelligence War that Beat the IRA* (Lisburn: Hiskey Ltd, 2016).

adversaries as being devoid of political support, as being motivated by mere criminality, as being characterized by mental illness, as being short of political purpose, when much of the time these diagnoses are demonstrably false. Every time the Trump Administration delivers a public statement on terrorism, and every time it endeavors to develop a policy regarding terrorism, it should consider the various audiences that are involved. If what is said or planned would seem implausible to potential recruits from the terrorists' constituency, or could be falsified by the terrorists themselves, then the Administration will have done itself considerable harm. The fact that most terrorist organizations rely on sane people with some measure of political commitment does not in any way legitimate those groups' murderous violence. But to deny these realities—whether dealing with jihadists or with other kinds of terrorist actors—makes counterterrorism more difficult rather than easier.

One particular area of importance for the Trump regime will be the relationship between Islam and terrorism. It has been too tempting for some politicians and commentators in the twenty-first century to present casually the connection between Islam and terrorist violence. In truth, the relationship is complex. While many Muslim terrorists do find at least part of their motivation and justification in the realm of religious belief, it is also true that the vast majority of the world's Muslims have no sympathy for jihadist terrorism, that relations between Islam and the major non-Muslim communities in the world has been and remains benign,¹² and that where there is a connection between Islam and terrorism it normally concerns very particular sub-sets of Islamic belief and practice. Here, the dynamics might indeed be important to recognize, whether one judges this to involve the particular lethality of certain kinds of religious cults due to their capacity to weed out shirkers and defectors,¹³ or the possible elements of certain forms of Islam as they appeal to certain kinds of personality types.¹⁴

But such arguments are some distance from any crass suggestion of an automatic or inevitable causal relationship between Islamic faith and terrorism. And any statements from the president or those around him that concern religion and terrorism must be credible, and must acknowledge (for example) that the vast majority of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims utterly despise jihadist terrorism. To take a different approach will be to lose credibility across much of the Muslim world (which could be disastrous) and indeed to worsen the disaffection that exists against the United States.

¹² J. Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2015); D. Cannadine, *The Undivided Past: History Beyond Our Differences* (London: Penguin, 2013).

¹³ E. Berman, *Radical, Religious and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

¹⁴ D. Gambetta and S. Hertog, *Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Moreover, adhering to evidence-based, credible, and calm assessments of terrorism can still allow for confidence that one's arguments against terrorists will prove damaging to the latter. Indeed, close scrutiny of the arguments and politics of terrorists over many decades suggests that states' own arguments, patiently and calmly articulated, can indeed tend to undermine their terrorist opponents as long as the state adheres to credible interpretations and analyses.¹⁵ To offer arguments that lack credibility and which can be falsified—whether in terms of the nature of terrorism itself, its causes, or the prospects for defeating it—would do more harm to President Trump than to his violent opponents.

5. The Administration must maintain an appropriate sense of the true scale of the threat, and therefore adopt a proportional level of response.

One of the most striking aspects of terrorism is that it seizes attention on a far greater scale than it actually does damage in practice. This point has been emphasized repeatedly in the scholarly literature: 'although the yearly chance an American will be killed by a terrorist within the country is about one in 4 million under present conditions, around 40 percent of Americans have professed, in polls taken since late 2001, that they worry they or a family member will become a victim of a terrorist'.¹⁶ A broader point about the degree of threat to the United States as such is equally vital: 'The actual danger of the new international terrorist networks to the regimes of stable states in the developed world...remains negligible'.¹⁷

This is not to deny the possibility that a larger-scale threat might emerge in the future from non-state terrorist sources, and of course the Trump Administration must assess that threat carefully and responsibly. The point, however, is that as things stand, the threat of terrorism to the United States is far, far less great than, say, the threat from climate change. Moreover, to exaggerate the degree of terrorist threat can provide the basis for those unhelpful overreactions that (from France to the United Kingdom to Israel to the United States itself) have so often made terrorists' causes easier to sustain throughout modern history. Revenge for violence against one's community has repeatedly been a key motivation for terrorists and a crucial means of their recruiting activists.¹⁸ Military and other forms of state over-reaction (including the ill-judged use of torture against terrorist suspects) have repeatedly made such revenge easier for terrorists to deploy in their campaigns against Western and other states. So the Trump Administration must

¹⁵ English, *Does Terrorism Work?*

¹⁶ J. Mueller and M. G. Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 7.

¹⁷ E. Hobsbawm, *Globalization, Democracy and Terrorism* (London: Little, Brown, 2007), p. 135.

¹⁸ L. Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat* (London: John Murray, 2006).

resist the temptation to exaggerate the threat, and it must avoid overreaction and an overreliance on military methods of countering terrorism.

Conclusion

I am fully aware how different are the challenges involved, respectively, in running a major country and in merely offering academic analysis such as that which is included in this article. Moreover, I have no expectation that policymakers in Washington will attend closely to what a mere university professor says on this subject. But the importance of some form of such reflection about the history of terrorism seems to me unarguable. To approach any major policy challenge without deep reflection on the long inheritance that a new president encounters in that field would make their job more difficult. Here, I am making five main points.

- What the Administration will have to deal with is *terrorisms*, rather than terrorism.
- The Administration must be realistic (internally, as well as publicly) about what might reasonably be expected to be achieved in the field of counterterrorism.
- The Administration must be coordinated and unified in its counterterrorism, both within the US state, and in terms of its external alliances.
- The Administration must communicate a sustainedly credible series of messages about terrorism.
- The Administration must maintain an appropriate sense of the true scale of the threat, and therefore adopt a proportional level of response.

No counterterrorist policy will save every life. But the long history of terrorism and counterterrorism seems to me to suggest that adherence to the above five principles would enable President Trump to protect many lives and limbs from terrorism during his time in office.

About the Author

Richard English is Professor of Politics at Queen's University Belfast, where he is also Distinguished Professorial Fellow in the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security, and Justice. From 2011–2016 he was Director of the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews. His books have won numerous awards and include Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA (2003), Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland (2006)

and Does Terrorism Work? A History (2016). He is a Fellow of the British Academy, a Member of the Royal Irish Academy, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, an Honorary Fellow of Keble College Oxford, and an Honorary Professor at the University of St Andrews.